

The Sixth Borough - By JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER

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Once upon a time, New York City had a Sixth Borough. You won't read about it in any of the history books, because there's nothing - save for the circumstantial evidence in Central Park - to prove that it was there at all. Which makes its existence very easy to dismiss. Especially in a time like this one, when the world is so unpredictable, and it takes all of one's resources just to get by in the present tense. But even though most people will say they have no time or reason to believe in the Sixth Borough, and don't believe in the Sixth Borough, they will still use the word "believe."

The Sixth Borough was an island, separated from Manhattan by a thin body of water, whose narrowest crossing happened to equal the world's long jump record, such that exactly one person on earth could go from Manhattan to the Sixth Borough without getting wet. A huge party was made of the yearly leap. Bagels were strung from island to island on special spaghetti, samosas were bowled at baguettes, Greek salads were thrown like confetti. The children of New York captured fireflies in glass jars, which they floated between the boroughs. The bugs would slowly asphyxiate, flickering rapidly for their last few minutes of life. If it was timed right, the river shimmered as the jumper crossed it.

When the time finally came, the long jumper would run the entire width of Manhattan. New Yorkers rooted him on from opposite sides of the street, from the windows of their apartments and offices, from the branches of the trees. And when he leapt, New Yorkers cheered from the banks of both Manhattan and the Sixth Borough, cheering on the jumper, and cheering on each other. For those few moments that the jumper was in the air, every New Yorker felt capable of flight.

Or perhaps "suspension" is a better word. Because what was so inspiring about the leap was not how the jumper got from one borough to the other, but how he stayed between them for so long.

One year - many, many years ago - the end of the jumper's big toe touched the surface of the water and caused a little ripple. People gasped, as the ripple traveled out from the Sixth Borough back toward Manhattan, knocking the jars of fireflies against one another like wind chimes.

"You must have gotten a bad start!" a Manhattan councilman hollered from across the water.

The jumper nodded no, more confused than ashamed.

"You had the wind in your face," a Sixth Borough councilman suggested, offering a towel for the jumper's foot.

The jumper shook his head.

"Perhaps he ate too much for lunch," said one onlooker to another.

"Or maybe he's past his prime," said another, who'd brought his kids to watch the leap.

"I bet his heart wasn't in it," said another. "You just can't expect to jump that far without some serious feeling."

"No," the jumper said to all of the speculation. "None of that's right. I jumped just fine."

The revelation traveled across the onlookers like the ripple caused by the toe, and when the mayor of New York City spoke it aloud, everyone sighed in agreement: "The Sixth Borough is moving."

Each year after, a few inches at a time, the Sixth Borough receded from New York. One year, the long jumper's entire foot got wet, and after a number of years, his shin, and after many, many years - so many years that no one could even remember what it was like to celebrate without anxiety - the jumper had to reach out his arms and grab at the Sixth Borough fully extended, and then, sadly, he couldn't touch it at all. The eight bridges between Manhattan and the Sixth Borough strained and finally crumbled, one at a time, into the water. The tunnels were pulled too thin to hold anything at all.

The phone and electrical lines snapped, requiring Sixth Boroughers to revert to old-fashioned technologies, most of which resembled children's toys: they used magnifying glasses to reheat their carry-out; they folded important documents into paper airplanes and threw them from one office building window into another; those fireflies in glass jars, which had once been used merely for decorative purposes during the festivals of the leap, were now found in every room of every apartment, taking the place of artificial light.

The very same engineers who dealt with the Leaning Tower of Pisa were brought over to assess the situation.

"It wants to go," they said.

"Well, what can you say about that?" the mayor of New York asked.

To which they replied, "There's nothing to say about that."

Of course they tried to save it. Although "save" might not be the right word, as it did seem to want to go. Maybe "detain" is the right word. Chains were moored to the banks

of the islands, but the links soon snapped. Concrete pilings were poured around the perimeter of the Sixth Borough, but they, too, failed. Harnesses failed, magnets failed, even prayer failed.

Young friends, whose string-and-tin-can phone extended from island to island, had to pay out more and more string, as if letting kites go higher and higher.

"It's getting almost impossible to hear you," said the young girl from her bedroom in Manhattan, as she squinted through a pair of her father's binoculars, trying to find her friend's window.

"I'll holler if I have to," said her friend from his bedroom in the Sixth Borough, aiming last birthday's telescope at her apartment.

The string between them grew incredibly long, so long it had to be extended with many other strings tied together: the wind of his yo-yo, the pull from her talking doll, the twine that had fastened his father's diary, the waxy string that had kept her grandmother's pearls around her neck and off the floor, the thread that had separated his great-uncle's childhood quilt from a pile of rags. Contained within everything they shared with one another were the yo-yo, the doll, the diary, the necklace, and the quilt. They had more and more to tell each other, and less and less string.

The boy asked the girl to say "I love you" into her can, giving her no further explanation.

And she didn't ask for any, or say, "That's silly" or "We're too young for love" or even suggest that she was saying "I love you" because he asked her to. Her words traveled the yo-yo, the doll, the diary, the necklace, the quilt, the clothesline, the birthday present, the harp, the tea bag, the table lamp, the tennis racket, the hem of the skirt he one day should have pulled from her body. The boy covered his can with a lid, removed it from the string, and put her love from him on a shelf in his closet. Of course, he could never open the can, because then he would lose its contents. It was enough just to know that it was there.

Some, like that boy's family, wouldn't leave the Sixth Borough. Some said: "Why should we? It's the rest of the world that's moving. Our borough is fixed. Let them leave Manhattan." How can you prove someone like that wrong? And who would want to?

For most Sixth Boroughers, though, there was no question of refusing to accept the obvious, just as there was no underlying stubbornness, or principle, or bravery. They just didn't want to go. They liked their lives and didn't want to change. So they floated away, one inch at a time.

All of which brings us to Central Park.

Central Park didn't used to be where it now is. It used to rest squarely in the center of the Sixth Borough; it was the joy of the borough, its heart. But once it was clear that the

Sixth Borough was receding for good, that it couldn't be saved or detained, it was decided, by New York City referendum, to salvage the park. (The vote was unanimous. Even the most obdurate Sixth Boroughers acknowledged what must be done.) Enormous hooks were driven deep into ground, and the park was pulled, by the people of New York, like a rug across a floor, from the Sixth Borough into Manhattan.

Children were allowed to lie down on the park as it was being moved. This was considered a concession, although no one knew why a concession was necessary, or why it was to children that this concession must be made. The biggest fireworks show in history lighted the skies of New York City that night, and the Philharmonic played its heart out.

The children of New York lay on their backs, body to body, filling every inch of the park as if it had been designed for them and that moment. The fireworks sprinkled down, dissolving in the air just before they reached the ground, and the children were pulled, one inch and one second at a time, into Manhattan and adulthood. By the time the park found its current resting place, every single one of the children had fallen asleep, and the park was a mosaic of their dreams. Some hollered out, some smiled unconsciously, some were perfectly still.

Was there really a Sixth Borough?

There's no irrefutable evidence.

There's nothing that could convince someone who doesn't want to be convinced.

But there is an abundance of clues that would give the wanting believer something to hold on to: in the peculiar fossil record of Central Park, in the incongruous pH level of the reservoir, in the placement of certain tanks at the zoo (which correspond to the holes left by the gigantic hooks that pulled the park from borough to borough).

There is a tree - just 24 paces due east from the entrance to the merry-go-round - into whose trunk are carved two names. They don't appear in any phone book or census. They are absent from all hospital and tax and voting records. There is no evidence whatsoever of their existence, other than the proclamation on the tree.

Here's a fact: no less than 5 percent of the names carved into the trees of Central Park are of unknown origin.

As all of the Sixth Borough's documents floated away with the Sixth Borough, we will never be able to prove that those names belonged to residents of the Sixth Borough, and were carved when Central Park still resided there, instead of in Manhattan. So some believe that they are made-up names and, to take the doubt a step further, that the gestures of love were made-up gestures. Others believe other things.

But it's hard for anyone, even the most cynical of cynics, to spend more than a few minutes in Central Park without feeling that he or she is experiencing some tense in addition to just the present. Maybe it's our own nostalgia for what's past, or our own hopes for what's to come. Or maybe it's the residue of the dreams from that night the park was moved, when all of the children of New York City exercised their subconsciouses at once. Maybe we miss what they had lost, and yearn for what they wanted.

There's a gigantic hole in the middle of the Sixth Borough where Central Park used to be. As the island moves across the planet, it acts like a frame, displaying what lies beneath it.

The Sixth Borough is now in Antarctica. The sidewalks are covered in ice, the stained glass of the public library is straining under the weight of the snow. There are frozen fountains in frozen neighborhood parks, where frozen children are frozen at the peaks of their swings-the frozen ropes holding them in flight. The tzitzit of frozen little Jewish boys are frozen, as are the strands of their frozen mothers' frozen wigs. Livery horses are frozen mid-trot, flea-market vendors are frozen mid-haggle, middle-aged women are frozen in the middle of their lives. The gavels of frozen judges are frozen between guilty and innocent. On the ground are the crystals of the frozen first breaths of babies, and those of the last gasps of the dying. On a frozen shelf, in a closet frozen shut, is a can with a voice inside it.

Jonathan Safran Foer is the author of "Everything Is Illuminated" and the forthcoming "Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close."